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Is 'Another' Public Sphere Actually Possible?¹ **The Case of "Women Without" in the European Social Forum Process as a** **Critical Test for Deliberative Democracy**

By Nicole Doerr²

Abstract

This paper presents results of a cross-national comparative research project on the case of democracy in the European Social Forums (ESFs) process over the period from 2003 to 2005. The various progressive social movements engaged in the European Social Forums process try to construct "another world" and "another public sphere" internally within their own practices of participatory and deliberative democracy in public forums. This includes fighting discriminations against women in general and women from non-western European parts of the world in particular. I take as my point of departure the case of "women without," that is women activists who lack financial resources and/or have problems participating in transnational meetings because of border or visa restrictions. In the context of the European, preparatory meetings to the ESF, these women are for the most part either migrants living in the European Union or women coming from Eastern, South or Central Europe. To what extent do the effective processes of decision-making in the ESF preparatory process include the perspective and claims of materially less privileged participants, in particular these distinct groups of "women without"? Based on a feminist critique of the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy, I discuss the quality of democratic deliberation in the ESF's assemblies from the perspective of the networks of "women without". Then, as a second step, I show how the strategies of these materially less privileged activists break discursive mechanisms of exclusion inside the ESF process and build their own transnational networks subverting the ruling discourse structure of the ESF.

Keywords: public sphere, feminist, deliberative democracy

The social forums emerging in different places all over the world can be seen as an experiment to realise in practice the global justice movement's claim to create "another" public sphere across national, cultural and social boundaries. In Europe, it is precisely the enormous ideological diversity of the different individuals and groups involved in the large European Social Forum (ESF) that gives the process of deliberative and consensual decision-making importance as a common procedural source of legitimation (see della Porta et al. 2003, della Porta 2005). The activists within the European Social Forum process collectively organise the ESF summit through a series of

¹ I would like to thank Manuela Boatcă, Enrica Capussotti, Magda Dabrowska, Donatella della Porta, Martin Geiger, Elena Del Giorgio, Virginie Guiraudon, Christoph Haug, Amelie Kutter, Trinh Minh-ha, Mayo Fuster Morell and Shirin Rai for their comments and ideas regarding my essay.

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transnational preparatory assemblies.³ The experiment of deliberative decision-making in these multilingual and European-wide preparatory assemblies is an interesting empirical case for discussing different theories of deliberative democracy.

I will test the Habermasian model of “deliberative democracy” by confronting it with the alternative model of “communicative democracy” developed by Iris Young. My research question thereby is to ask to what extent the specific practice of deliberative decision-making in different (national and European) meetings of the European Social Forum preparatory process is capable of including less privileged activists or activists who lack basic resources, whom I study in the example of “women without.”⁴ The concept of *gender* is defined here as a “variable” that influences social contexts and performs in power relations through the systems of language and knowledge. I propose thus to follow Judith Butler in understanding gender “as a doing” (1999: 33). Moreover, I assume that socially constructed gender differences, in close interrelation with material inequalities, will have an impact on dialogue and decision-making in public spaces, conditioning and limiting the culturally specific and historically bound “dialogic possibilities” (ibid: 20). My hypothesis is that gender discrimination in the ESF process does not perform simply between the dichotomous subjects of “women” and “men,” but as a result of the combination of the condition of material inequalities and a culturally biased style of discussion that “tends to silence or devalue some people or groups” while elevating others (see Young 1996: 120). Theoretically, I derive my approach from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s thoughts on “measuring silences” of the female subaltern within discourse (1988: 285, 286). I therefore adapt the concept of “women without” from Spivak’s discussion of the postcolonial condition to an intercultural and mixed transnational space like the European Social Forum. My aim thereby is to show that, while some groups within the ESF process have successfully realised some claims of the feminist movements—such as creating women’s spaces and installing gender quota for speakers—not all women benefit equally from these improvements.

Thus, I would argue that the European Social Forum cannot be understood without considering its inner contradictions related to a capitalist world-system whose “core and periphery relations” (Wallerstein 1974) make themselves felt in the structure of communication and of organisation within the ESF preparatory meetings. Moreover, the idea to create the basis for ‘another’ Europe in the ESF suffers from an internally hierarchical and Eurocentric preparation process that tends to inadvertently reproduce a globalised system of class inequalities (see Wallerstein 1997). I would argue that while the ESF was created as a space to reflect about “another” Europe, the internal practice of decision-making in its organisation process reproduces and implicitly normalises multiple discriminations in terms of class, race and gender and thereby limits its emancipatory potential as “another” public space (Fraser 2005, 3). Those “without” who represent and

³ The European preparatory assemblies to the ESF take place several times a year in different places across Europe in a multilingual context (see Boéri 2006, Doerr 2006b).

⁴ By “women without” I refer to those activists who lack financial resources and/or have problems participating in transnational meetings because of border or visa restrictions. In the case of the European preparatory meetings to the ESF, this concerned most of all the two distinctive groups of women who live in the EU as migrants from non-‘Western’ (European) countries and/or who come from Eastern, South and Central Eastern Europe. The concept of “women without” is inspired in respect to the French notion ‘sans’ (for ‘without’) that has been invented by activists in political struggles for access to citizenship or social rights (e.g. in the movements of the ‘Sans papiers’).

are seen as Europe's periphery in the ESF process are not only participants from Eastern European countries taking part in the ESF, but also the formally included though effectively excluded migrants from former colonies living in the countries of the core (Balibar).

To show this, I will focus on the case of "women without" who become Europe's invisible and gendered "Other" through multiple discriminations within the ESF process. Moreover, the idea of studying the practice of deliberative democracy through the case of "women without" in the ESF process allows me to discuss the inherent power relations as related to the discourse on "Europe" and the European Union in the social forums as contested political spaces in themselves. I would therefore like to keep the definition of the terms "Europe," "Eastern" and "Western Europe" open and understand Europe as an essentially contested concept (Str  th 2000: 28-30) that cannot be seen independent of historical contingency and a past of colonialism and ethnocentrism (Fanon).

Discussing Deliberative Democracy from a Feminist Perspective

J  rgen Habermas, reflecting on democracy in the public sphere, conceptualises an assumed "ideal speech situation" in which all the participants and affected stake-holders have an equal chance to express their opinion, to make claims and to be given answers in a free and open setting (256).⁵ However, feminist scholars have pointed out that Habermas derives the ideal of an open, egalitarian and public discourse from the historical model of the public sphere itself, which excluded many women, less privileged men and talk on private issues (Fraser 1992: 115, Lang , Young 1996: 122). As an alternative to the Habermasian model of a single public sphere Iris Young thus suggests "[a] theory of communicative democracy that attends to social difference, to the way that power sometimes enters speech itself, recognizes the cultural specificity of deliberative practices, and proposes a more inclusive model of communication" (123).

Taking these contrasting theoretical assumptions as an interesting point of departure, I would like to empirically analyse the discursive quality of the public arenas in the ESF preparatory assemblies through a discourse analytical approach. I will test Young's critical hypothesis that "deliberation is competition," and not a universalist dialogical procedure in which "all people actually have the right to express claims and give reasons according to their own understanding" (123). I will ask whether the "female subalterns," if given the chance to make their claims in the ESF preparatory meetings, "can speak" for themselves, represent themselves and if they are effectively listened to and taken as serious by other (Western European, non-migrant) participants in discourse (Spivak).

For data collection I applied the method of participant observation and eventually, analysed the spoken discourse at the national preparatory meetings in Germany and the European preparatory meetings through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (see Wodak 1996). To take into consideration the social context in which these meetings take place, I also collected data on the participants' attitudes on democracy using a survey (n: 100) and 80 qualitative in-depth interviews with activists.

⁵ See Benhabib 1986:285.

Deliberation and Competition for Visibility in the ESF Preparatory Process

My results show two tendencies with regard to the inclusion of “women without” in the ESF preparatory process. On the one hand, the organisers of the ESF process have tried to balance gender and material inequalities, for instance by introducing a “parity rule” for speakers and providing “solidarity funding” for activists lacking resources.⁶ On the other hand, not only external obstacles to access, such as geographical distance and lack of material resources, seemed to block equal participation, but also the internal development of a particular informal and not very transparent decision-making process, in which a very small number of “insiders” made the decisions (Doerr 2006b).

Interestingly enough, gender seems to have an influence on the way to judge these problems of access in the ESF preparatory process: independent of their age or their ideological and socio-economic background, women activists in the ESF preparatory process were more sensitive to the need to provide an open and inclusive process than were men. As the results of the survey indicate, women have a significantly stronger attachment to some of the principles of grassroots democracy such as providing an equal opportunity for everyone to participate, fighting possible discrimination and respecting the principle of rotation within the assemblies.⁷ Besides these structural similarities among women in terms of perceiving possible problems of democracy in the meetings, different strategies were used by women active in the ESF preparatory assemblies depending on their different positions in the movements and in society, which I will discuss now.

Women Actors: Different Visibilities Dependent on Different Opportunities of Access

At first sight, one can distinguish four more or less distinctive groups, or clusters of women in the preparatory process, based on the ease or difficulty with which they gain access to the process. I will work with these roughly constructed clusters as a tool for showing hidden power asymmetries in public space. However, I hope the reader does not understand them as essentialist categories.

1. *Professional activists*. Of the participating women who were very visible in the ESF preparatory process, one is the cluster of “professional” and/or long-term, experienced activists from Western Europe. These professional activists had access to leadership positions such as the crucial role of facilitators. This cluster was politically the most influential and involved group of women activists in the ESF. Their influence came from their in-depth knowledge of the ESF preparatory process, linked to their position as delegates or speakers representing powerful organisations, such as trade unions or political parties.

2. *Organisers of the women’s assembly*. One can also distinguish a second, somewhat less visible group, that is, a cluster of feminist activists related to the network

⁶ The solidarity fund has been instituted to give activists with less financial resources the possibility to participate in transnational meetings.

⁷ These are the results of the survey in which I asked 100 respondents representing different countries and ideological groups in the ESF process about their attitudes towards the internal democracy. The results in detail are (1). female respondents find it more important to *combat discriminations* (Chi² 0.05*); (2) female respondents emphasise stronger the *necessity to give everyone the same opportunity to participate* in the meetings (Chi² 0.03*); (3). female respondents find it more important to respect the *principle of rotation* (Chi² 0.01*).

World March of Women in countries such as France and Greece. This group was closely involved in the internal French organising committee during the preparation of the ESF 2003 and succeeded in organising two women's assemblies within the ESF since then. Both the professional activists and the activists from the network *World March of Women* have been criticised for dominating the process and for having indirectly blocked the emergence of more inclusive transnational women's networks. This criticism came from two other, less visible clusters of activists involved in the ESF preparatory process: grassroots activists and different groups of feminists from Western Europe and "women without."

3. *Grassroots activists and various groups of feminists from Western Europe.* By this cluster, I refer to women from different types of horizontal networks working on different issues, who are active in the global justice movement in Western Europe. Some of them participate in feminist networks but in the context of the ESF preparatory process took a critical perspective towards the organisers of the women's assemblies. A significant problem for many of these activists was their lack of time, money and organisational resources to participate in the European preparatory process. Despite this, they still had quite good access to the networks of the global justice movement in terms of social resources, such as contacts, networks and information. This cluster enjoyed relatively greater ease in gaining access to the ESF process and in getting involved than did the fourth cluster of participating women activists.

4. *Activists from migrant networks and from Eastern, Central and South Eastern Europe.* One cluster of various and diverse groups of women active in the ESF preparatory process can be distinguished from the former three clusters through their greater problems in gaining access to the meetings. Difficulty in access firstly in terms of gaining physical access to the European preparatory meetings in various cities across Europe or at the national level (because of their meager financial resources and/or their difficulty in gaining and paying for visas) and, secondly, in terms of being included effectively in its discourse and organisation. The women who had these difficulties were mostly migrants from self-organised migrant groups in Western Europe, activists from Eastern, Central and South Eastern Europe and activists from participating social forums from outside the EU like the Turkish or Iran Social Forums. For the theoretical and political interest of their position in the ESF, I will especially consider the point of view of these "women without" on decision-making in the ESF preparatory process. In my participant observation I found that "women without" speaking in the plenum would in the majority of the cases be simply pushed back and interrupted by the facilitators or other speakers (national level) or not listened to (European level). In order to illustrate these results, I will now briefly present some results from the discourse analysis of the debates in the plenary assemblies.

National Level: "Women Without" Fighting for the Right to Speak in Public

At the national level, I studied the role of "women without" in the case of migrants in the European Social Forum preparatory process in Germany.⁸ Unlike the European meetings, preparatory assemblies at the national level have the advantage of being geographically easier to access for "women without." Nevertheless, the latter

⁸ These included self-organised groups of migrant women, social forum activists or women from migrant unions.

seemed to have problems getting information about these national preparatory assemblies, and becoming included in the collective process of discussion and organisation—despite the explicit willingness of the Social Forum in Germany to provide an open space. The following statement of a migrant named Neyla describes an excluding discourse in the national preparatory meetings in Germany:

It is always the same. We are treated as if we were air. They talk *about* us but not *with* us, even if we are there and sit in the same room as them. There is just no reaction concerning questions which we migrants consider to be important. In Florence [i.e. European Social Forum in Florence], this was different [...]. During the German preparatory meetings for Florence, I made proposals for the speakers [i.e. for the ESF summit]. I proposed a speaker from my home country. But this speaker was not accepted by the organising committee of the social forum preparatory assembly here in Germany. That is why I have made no proposal this time [...]. I demanded that we discuss this in the meeting [i.e. preparatory assembly of the Social Forum in Germany], but they did not let me speak until the end.⁹

The criticism of this activist (“we are treated as if we were air”) seems to indicate that despite the method of formally inclusive and deliberative decision-making within the German preparatory assemblies to the ESF, there exist practices of discursive exclusion that silence the voices of “women without”. This impression was not only reflected in the interviews with migrants but also in the discourse analysis. Accordingly, when asking critical questions or proposing a speaker, the voices of migrants were often ignored or at least given significantly less attention than the voices of other (German) participants in the observed meetings.¹⁰ These subtle discriminations were experienced by all migrants in the German meetings, but interestingly, gender differences with regard to this seemed to have intervened in an unexpected way: more women among the migrants than men protested against this unequal treatment. I will show these structural results in the concrete example of a discussion in one preparatory meeting in Germany.

In this meeting, migrant women wanted to discuss publicly, in the assembly, the question of visas for the ESF in London. This request, however, was blocked by the German facilitators, two men from the inner “coordination board” of the preparatory group in Germany, who argued that the visa question should not be discussed in public in the plenum due to a lack of general interest and time.¹¹ After the end of this preparatory meeting in which the debate on the question whether or not to discuss the visa question in the plenum took place, I got the following statement from one of the involved parties, Ayse, a woman from a migrant group:

⁹ My translation of an interview with Neyla from a network of migrant women in Germany during a preparatory meeting in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, September 2003. The names of the activists are changed in order to ensure anonymity.

¹⁰ Result of participant observation within the preparatory assemblies in Germany from 2003-2006.

¹¹ See the transcript of the preparatory meeting in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, September 2003. For a detailed discourse analysis see Doerr 2006a.

As a migrant, I have, like many others, a big problem with London as the place where the next ESF shall take place [...]. The probability that my visa request will be rejected is about 50 percent, because I cannot show to the English that I have work. The important thing is that I spoke about this *before* the decision was made that the ESF will take place in London. But my position was not taken seriously and considered an “anti-position” within the “consensus” of the German preparatory assembly that decided that the ESF 2004 will take place in London [...]. In the preparatory meeting today, again, it has been pushed back from public debate with the justification that we don’t have time for this right now [...]. They do not like to bother with it. They believe that these are the problems of foreigners [a: German: *Ausländerprobleme*].¹²

On the other hand, the facilitator of this meeting explained his decision not to talk about visa problems in public, within the plenary assembly, with a pragmatic though highly exclusive approach:

First, I think, the visa questions should not be discussed because we should wait to hear what London says about this before we start a campaign. Maybe the English foreign minister will make an exception. Now we don’t need public discussions about this. Maybe people could secretly travel in other people’s jacket pockets.¹³

The example of the discussion and the different positions on the visa issue show that the German facilitator interviewed did not take the problems migrants have about getting access seriously, as his statement “travel in other people’s jacket pockets,” thought to be a funny remark, shows. Now, linking these empirical impressions back to theory, one can state from a Habermasian perspective that within the observed debate on the visa question neither the (good) arguments made by the migrants nor their potentially important symbolic role in the self-definition of the Social Forum in Germany as an open space counted.

However, the full picture of the power asymmetries in the discourse of this meeting becomes visible only if we consider the points emphasised by feminist scholars. Moreover, what seems to be closely related to the limits of deliberation in the observed preparatory meeting in Germany is the legitimacy to define the boundaries of public discourse that is bound to a culturally specific type of agonistic public debate that privileges a white male upper class style over the speech of women and of lower classes or racial minorities (Young 1996: 123). In the example discussed here, the controversy on the opportunity to discuss visa questions in the main plenum illustrates that the definition of what is “private” and what needs to be discussed in public depends highly on a system

¹² My translation. Extract from the interview after the meeting of the preparatory assembly in Frankfurt, 21.-22.2.2004

¹³ Ibid.

of knowledge and power resources constituting the socio-cultural context of discourse in public spaces.

In relation to this, sociolinguistic studies stress that “the gate-keepers are powerful actors, i.e. those actors who speak, write and understand the right language at the right moment” (Wodak 2002: 21, my translation). The gatekeepers in the national preparatory meeting analysed above were German activists, in the first place, men representing important organisations. Interestingly, it was a young second generation migrant (Ayse) who contested the contextually shaped boundaries of public discourse in this assembly, while her male colleague from a trade union for Turkish migrants accepted that talking about migrant issues in the public ESF-preparatory assembly in Germany was a “waste of time.”¹⁴ Worth noticing with regard to gender is the significant difference between migrant women making claims and silent migrant men. As I will show, this finding contradicts the stereotypical image that some Western European leaders in the ESF preparatory process developed of women from non Western European countries in describing them as “silent” and “shy” despite their actual agency and resistance (see Mohanty 2003: 31, 72).

Apart from this, it is important to note that gender influences discourse within this national preparatory meeting in a complex way: it was not “women in general” whose claims were assumed to have no general relevance to be discussed publicly, but it was the claims of “women without”. Accordingly, it was not alongside a simple dichotomy of gender differences that power inequalities performed, but through a combination of gender *and* the socially and culturally specific set of codes defining the right way to make a speech in public.

Departing from these observations of a preparatory assembly at the national level, I would further direct attention towards the European level of meetings, in which there is a greater percentage of women among the facilitators and leaders in the preparatory assemblies.¹⁵ Thus, what is interesting to ask is whether the stronger presence of women among the internal leadership at the European level as compared to the national level might improve the position of “women without”, or not. As I would like to show, “women without” in transnational meetings indeed seemed to find more room for voicing their claims than within national meetings but still found themselves marginalised when it came to the effective distribution of resources.

Allowed to Speak, but not Being Listened to: “Women Without” in European Meetings

The difficulty of accessing the European preparatory meetings that took place several times a year was particularly problematic for “women without”. For example, the distribution of money from the solidarity funds remained unstable and ad hoc—so that activists sometimes did not receive the promised money.¹⁶ This unequal distribution of power based on different resources became obvious in the fragile status of “women

¹⁴ Transcript of the plenary debate of the preparatory assembly in Frankfurt, 21.-22.2.2004. My data (see Doerr 2006a).

¹⁵ Several elements might explain this difference between national and European level. As the results of the survey show, the participating women in the social forums have better skills in foreign languages than men and consider their lack of knowledge of other countries as less important than men do (result of the survey, n: 100).

¹⁶ Compare the discussion on the ESF-FSE e-mail list, September 2006.

without” as claims-makers: different from the national level, the facilitators let them speak and make assertions in front of the plenum. Nevertheless, their arguments and demands did not seem to have any particular impact on subsequent decisions. A short example of a debate on the distribution of speakers in which “women without” made claims within one European preparatory meeting shall illustrate this significant result of discourse analysis and interviews. The debate on the distribution of speakers in the ESF focused on the problem of how to distribute a limited number of people who could be nominated as speakers within the large ESF plenary assemblies. The French organising committee preparing the ESF in Paris had decided that this distribution would work along national and ideological criteria, complemented also by the criterion of gender equality.

Considering the case of “women without”, several aspects were interesting in this discussion. First, national criteria (i.e. a distribution of a certain number of speakers per country) seemed to play an important structuring role for the distribution of speakers among the different movements participating in the ESF. However, what happened within this most controversial plenary debate was that a few women, describing themselves as speaking for “women from Eastern Europe”, were able to start a debate on the criteria of fairness and equal distribution in the whole ESF preparatory process.¹⁷ As the low representation of women speakers from Eastern, Central and South Eastern Europe became obvious within the plenum, more dissatisfaction with an unequal distribution process was voiced within the formerly silent audience.

The professional activists facilitating the meeting, who were women from Western European national organising committees, reacted to this in a pragmatic though nation-focused way. On the one hand, they mentioned the importance of “women” as speakers in the assemblies of the ESF. However, their approach to the category of women considered women from their own countries first (“It is clear that the French women will remain”).¹⁸ At the same time, the facilitators discouraged the claims of other women by framing their claims to get more speakers from among women from Eastern, Central and South Eastern Europe as “impossible,” as this would have implicated a reduction of the (high) quota they had reserved for their own countries.¹⁹

With regard to gender and the question whether “women without” are given the opportunity to “represent” themselves (Spivak), it is worth noticing that “women without” were at several points contested as legitimate speakers for “their countries” (“She is not a representative of the Russian delegation”). In contrast to this, their male colleagues seemed to be well-known among the organisers as speaking, for instance, “for the Russian delegation.”²⁰ National representation seemed thus to reflect gender inequalities in which a woman seemed to be “less representative” than a man. Moreover, this observation shows that “women without” in the arena of the ESF preparatory meetings are not equal participants but became the “Other” in organisational categories of nationality and gender difference (see Balibar, Mohanty). Captured in the roles of *other* citizens (internally as compared to men from their countries, externally as “Eastern” or “shy” women), they were denied their right to represent and to speak for themselves and

¹⁷ European preparatory assembly in Genoa, July 2003. My transcript.

¹⁸ Facilitator within the debate on the distribution of speakers within the ESF 2003 in Paris, European preparatory assembly in Genoa, July 2003. My transcript.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

experienced the multiple discriminations of “those without” in a system that legitimises and normalises their marginalization under the veil of an assumed free and equal universalist public discourse (Wallerstein 2004: 38).

On the other hand, “women without” who did not speak the official working languages within the European preparatory meetings (English and French) particularly well were in a comparably better position than at the national level. Accordingly, at least those “women without” who were actually present were given the allowance to speak out what they had to say. It is interesting that, as already observed at the national level, it was again “women without” who within European meetings started making claims for themselves or women in their countries, and not their male colleagues. However, the decision on the distribution of speakers²¹ at the end of the European preparatory meetings studied still did not at all reflect the claims of women from Eastern, Central and South-Eastern Europe, as Anna, a feminist from Bulgaria expressed:

This wasn't a “European” assembly! Neither was this a consensus decision. It was not ok. Many people have been simply not been listened to and ignored, not only from Eastern Europe, but also from other delegations. There are a small number of people who have the power. They come from France, Italy, Great Britain and Greece. They make the decisions.²²

As this statement indicates, the discursive construction of “Europe” in the decision-making structure of the ESF preparatory assemblies seems to be dominated by activists coming from the countries of the *core* (France, Italy, the UK and, to a certain extent, also Greece). The cited activist from Bulgaria situates herself at the margins of this discourse on “Europe,” as a speaker (and one might add, as a woman) from “Eastern Europe,” who together with “many other people” has “simply not been listened to and ignored.” Thus, the asymmetric relationships between *core* and *periphery* are expressed in the ESF process through a subtle though effective combination of eurocentric and gendered mechanisms of exclusion in the discursive decision-making structure (Wallerstein 1997). What these impressions do not yet show is the impact of gender on the self-representation of the activists. I will discuss this in the following section.

Representation, Visibility and Invisibility of Gender in the Preparatory Assemblies

As we have seen, speaking in the name of “women” represents one discourse among others in the agonistic arena of the social forums through which different actors compete in different ways for visibility in the ESF preparatory process, and in which the “better argument” defeats other perspectives (see Young). Related to this, the predominant framing of the concept of gender in the ESF preparatory process in terms of “women’s issues” in the establishment of a women’s assembly founded by a particular group of women from Western European countries poses a problem of exclusion for

²¹ In the final decision, the number of speakers from Eastern, Central and South Eastern Europe had still decreased from its original number at the beginning of the meeting. European preparatory assembly in Genoa, July 2003. My transcript.

²² Interview at the European preparatory meeting in Paris, September 2003.

other possible framings. Moreover, a discourse on gender, framed as something that concerns primarily the subject of “women,” risks excluding other possible subjects and inter-gender relations like “men” and post-binary gender identities like, for instance, gay, lesbian, queer, inter- or transsexual. While “women’s issues” were mostly addressed in the main meetings by the group of Western European feminists organising the “women’s assemblies”, the absence of a general deliberation on gender in the main assemblies covered over the subtle workings of gender in relation to class and race or national background as an invisible contextual variable structuring speech. To show this, I will refer to the in-depth interviews.

1. Interviews with men: Problems of the past

The male activists I interviewed in the majority of cases saw no urgent problems in terms of gender representation in the European Social Forum process. Some of the activists I interviewed made jokes about women activists in the plenum. The jokes often focused on the figure of one important woman who as a leader had played a central role in the preparatory process, as an extract from one interview might illustrate:

The ESF preparatory process is a matriarchy. Look at X (a woman leader). The men are afraid of her. If you ask me, she is not a woman any more; even if she has no penis, she is a man. Not a physical man of course [...] but for the rest, she is. She wears trousers and the men follow.²³

Interestingly, this joke seems to indicate that women who become leaders in the ESF preparatory process might lose a part of their femininity and, in the perception of their male comrades, become something that one might call a “social man”. The transgressive and unstable element in this perceived shift from “woman” to something like a “social man” is that a woman leader still is not a “real man” as “she has no penis”. I will later come back to this remark, which brings to mind Judith Butler’s discussion in “Antigone’s claim” of the transgression of *gender* and *kinship* relations by a speaking woman (Antigone) who breaks paternalist law through her repeated speech acts in the public sphere (Butler 2000). I will show that the stereotype of “woman-leader equals social-man” is not the only stereotype in the ESF preparatory process but finds its equivalent in another negatively constructed stereotype of “Eastern women” that is perceived by male activists as being “a bit shyer” and in this sense *different* from (more modern and emancipated) Western European women activists:

The women in the European preparatory process are political fighters. They are important personalities, they are intelligent. I have a lot of respect for them. They know how to make a claim. They do not fit the general stereotypes of women as being rather mediators or as not daring to speak up. Here men, of course, take more space in the debates as women, because they are used to having more space, traditionally.

²³ Interview with Gustave, an activist from France, at the European preparatory meeting in Istanbul, September 2005.

And then, finally, one should not forget that there are still those women who don't speak up. They come, I suppose, rather from the Eastern countries and it might be more difficult for them, they are perhaps a bit shyer."²⁴

The abstract of this interview might indicate why "women without" were perceived as being less visible: women from the Eastern countries were framed by this interviewee as being "shyer" – thus corresponding to a stereotype of traditional femininity. However, is it really shyness or does the stereotype of shy women from Eastern countries hide a more subtle interrelation of gender and power? Interestingly enough, the perception of women from the Eastern countries on the part of the interviewee lies in sharp contrast to the rather distressed tone of "women without" speaking in the meetings or in the interviews. Based on this evidence, I would suspect that the failure of the interviewee to notice the actual agency and resistance of "women without" and their struggle to be listened to might reflect the filtering of a reductionist, ethnocentric view of "different" non-Western European women participating in the ESF preparatory process (Mohanty 2003: 19). Moreover, the use of a familiar stereotype such as "women from the Eastern countries" covers over the actual claims of women speaking in the assembly and thus shows the bias in the assumption of an equal and open dialogue within the specific practice of deliberative democracy in the European preparatory meetings.

2. Interviews with women activists: male dominated assemblies

For most of the women I interviewed, the European preparatory meetings largely reflected the discriminations in patriarchal societies. What was interesting in the case of women who were highly engaged or professional activists was that they often seemed to have chosen more or less consciously not to openly express their affiliation to feminist or women's issues in public. The statement of an activist belonging to a European queer network indicates what the reason for this might be:

At the beginning I mentioned I belong to a queer group in my country when I made a statement but I stopped because then people would treat me like a pet. My dream is to not be treated like someone special but to be trusted. Here in the European preparatory meetings, which are dominated by the old left, they are very conservative on homosexuality, even if they are left. Now I simply say I belong to the organising committee in my country and I am taken more seriously.²⁵

As illustrated by these impressions, I would argue that even if some women had taken on an important role as a leader within the ESF preparatory process, many of their thoughts on gender remained invisible or private opinions, without being part of the

²⁴ My translation of an interview with Klaus from Attac Germany, European preparatory meeting in Vienna, January 2006.

²⁵ Interview with Antonia, ESF organising committee, European preparatory meeting in Vienna, January 2006.

official deliberation in the arena. The active participation of these activists seemed to go along with a more or less conscious strategy of hiding a part of their position on gender (to be feminist) or of their own gender identity (to be queer) in order to be equally recognized. Besides this, women leaders risked criticism from other women for their involvement in the perceived game of male power politics in the ESF:

There are also some exceptions, women who have this male dominance, like X., who is not trying to search for consensus but makes conflicts even deeper. It is no accident that X. plays such an important role in this process. She speaks for an organisation that always allows her to participate, she has the time to participate and she likes to dominate [...]. An opposite example is this French activist who organises the women's assembly: she also has the time and the money but she does not have the willingness to dominate – which she could do no problem. She wants to do something different.²⁶

This statement indicates the existence of cleavages between differently engaged women. The opposition that the statement above constructs between those women who “have this male dominance” and those women “who do not have the willingness to dominate” is highly problematic. One might hypothesize from this that a “social man” in the ESF preparatory process is a person who dominantly participates in the hard political negotiation process in the arena, while a “woman” is defined against this as a person who does not dominate. Again, gender performs alongside socio-economic criteria (X is supported financially by a big organisation). The opposite construction of gender implicit in these suggestions is problematic insofar as it implies logically the impossibility of a woman being both a (dominant) leader and a woman.

Thus, a woman by assuming leadership in the agonistic arena of the ESF preparatory process not only experiences a sort of de-solidarisation on the part of other feminists and women (as seen in the criticism of X on the part of Claudia), but she also loses her femininity in a male surrounding that perceives her as something nearly equal to a “real man” (“even if she has no penis”). The situation of a woman-leader in the ESF preparatory process reflects, I would suspect, the fragile and unstable position that Judith Butler finds for a speaking woman appropriating the speech of men in the public domain (Butler 2000). The possible injuries and social sanctions that this in-betweenness and the loss of other women's solidarity might be another reason why many women in the ESF process refrain from leadership. From these findings of two opposite stereotypes of women leaders as “manly women” on the one hand and “women without” as “silent Others” on the other hand, I would argue that the right to represent and to speak for and as a “woman” in the public space of the ESF preparatory process is limited to a certain category of women who are neither “manly” nor “Eastern” and who therefore fit in the dominant heterosexual order of discourse.

²⁶ My translation of an interview with Claudia, participant in the European preparatory meeting. Vienna, January 2006.

With regard to this point, Chandra Mohanty problematises the isolation of lesbianism in Western feminist contexts as well as the construction of a stereotyped image of women from the periphery as “the oppressed” (Mohanty 2003: 39). One might nevertheless take the crisis of representation, the breaking of the unwritten heterosexually oriented laws of citizenship that govern speech in the public sphere as a point of departure for a feminist strategy across borders (ibid 71, Butler 2000: 22). Accordingly, I would argue that it is women from all over the world and of all sexual orientations who fail to represent “woman” who might bring in new and unforeseen possibilities of change so that “another” discourse might emerge, finally, in the political public. This leads us to the actual strategies of resistance of those women who were described by the male interviewee as being “perhaps a bit shy,” that is, of “women without.”

“Women without”: choosing silence or not being listened to?

One structural problem described in the majority of interviews with “women without” was that the leading activists within the preparatory process, and also the organisers of the women’s assembly, did not effectively consider their positions and claims. The position of one migrant woman describes this:

I have tried to ask this woman from the French organising committee a question in a coffee break. It was an important question. The speakers from my country had disappeared from the list. But she said that unfortunately she didn’t understand me. My English is very bad. So she just let me stand there alone and went away to speak with another person. I have talked about this in the women’s assembly. I was in rage; I talked loud, about our situations as migrant women in Europe. But again, the French organisers of the women’s assembly just nodded their heads but apart from this did not give any reaction.²⁷

This interview shows two points: first, the perceived silence of “women without” is not a deliberate choice but related to the refusal of listening on the part of the leadership. Second, participant observation shows that the linguistic communication problems as mentioned in this interview did not only concern “women without” but also the leaders in the ESF preparatory process and the women’s assembly (Doerr 2006b). In consequence, the rage expressed by several “women without” did not find a response from leadership. Gender-based stereotypes like shyness thereby cover over the lack of attention that the (disruptive) claims of less privileged women receive from the internal leadership. It is not simply their perceived silence that makes “women without” less visible in the public plenums within the ESF preparatory process, but the combination of multiple discriminations due to socio-economic and gender-based gate-keeping functions and mutual linguistic communication problems.

²⁷ My translation of an interview with Samira from a migrant organisation, preparatory meeting in Frankfurt a. M., February 2003.

Conclusion

In sum, these impressions on deliberative democracy and the case of “women without” in the European Social Forum (ESF) preparatory process show that inequalities in terms of access to socio-economic resources that often go along with a eurocentric discourse determine whose claims are included in the decision-making and whose are not (see Wallerstein 1997). “Women without” get excluded in the ESF preparatory meetings not only through their greater difficulties in gaining access to the sites of the ESF and its preparatory meetings, but also through an internally exclusive and culturally biased discourse, agenda-setting and distribution of speech-time in the preparatory meetings. Gender influenced this discourse in a subtle, complex way. Gender discrimination did not perform simply between the dichotomous subjects of “women” and “men,” but as a result of the combination of socio-economic inequalities, a culturally biased agonistic style of discourse and the presence of a multiplicity of gate-keepers in the leadership of the ESF process.

It is not only biological men who practise the culturally specific tools of discussion to silence or discipline “women without,” but also some women. In this sense, the ESF preparatory process as an empirical test case for theories on deliberation shows that a Habermasian conceptualisation of deliberative democracy is not sufficient for understanding the structural bias in the production of “universalist reason” in public discourse itself. Moreover, the culturally specific norms of deliberation are used as a tool to legitimise the particularistic rationality of the socio-economically more privileged actors, some women and men, who act as gatekeepers while discouraging the speech of others, like for instance “women without.”

However, this kind of exclusive speech culture in the public arena is, at least partly, challenged at the transnational level, in which the plurality of languages and speech cultures interacts (Doerr 2006b). Thus, within the hybrid, intercultural, and, in this sense pluralistic transnational preparatory assemblies of the ESF process, “women without” at least received the right to make speeches. Using this opportunity, “women without” were able to make visible existing hierarchies and inequalities in the internal power structure of the ESF – which significantly distinguished them from their less disruptive male colleagues.

What can we learn from these impressions in order to develop a model of inclusive democracy applicable in the [wider] context of the Fórum Social Mundial? As we have seen, the claims of “women without” were not being listened to by the Western European leadership in the ESF preparatory assemblies. As an alternative to this, I would propose a reflective feminist strategy based on Iris Young’s model of “communicative democracy” and in particular on the principle of inclusive listening, understood as the collection and exchange of narratives. Mutual understanding in this model would not aim at creating a universally agreed-upon consensus. Based on a non-competitive ethics of public discourse, its goal would be a form of understanding that allows for the persistence of differences (Young 1996: 127, della Porta 2005). The central organising principle of this “other” public sphere would be not a competition of voices trying to convince each other through the best argument, but silence in the sense that silence would not be interpreted as absence, but as a time for mutual reflection, allowing for differences (Minh-ha 1998: 2).

Creating this kind of open and attentive space can only be possible if those at the centre of power make an effort and try to listen; that they un-learn to speak and to represent “woman”.²⁸ For this, an inclusive institutional setting would need to be created that makes possible an exchange of speakers and listeners. Those “without” would be given incentives to speak and to become a central part of the leadership, which would be expressed in their role of making the decisions concerning the choice of rhythm, the site of a Social Forum, and its contextual preparatory process. In this space, gender would not only be discussed in a “women’s assembly” in the form of an open and inclusive space; there would also exist a plurality of mixed and diverse discussion spaces on gender related topics so that gender would become a central object of discussion and of knowledge production in the Forum itself.

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²⁸ This idea is inspired by Prishani Naidoo’s presentation on the panel “Stories of Marginalisation,” South Africa National Lesbian Conference organised by the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW), Johannesburg, Aug 5-8, 2005.

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